DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 228 644 CS 207 432

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TITLE A Humanities Context for the Language Arts.
PUB DATE Oct 82
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the National Association for Humanities Education (Terre Haute, IN, October 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cultural Awareness; *Humanities; *Humanities Instruction; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Language Arts; Language Usage; Secondary Education; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

Through humanities instruction, students can begin to understand their own culture by examining other cultures. From this examination, students may perceive that some values other than, or even contrary to, their own accepted ones offer meaning, purpose, validity, utility, and beauty. A review of the search for meaning through the humanities offers an opportunity to synthesize the diversities of human experience, rescuing it from such fragmentations as nationalism, elitism, fashion, and fad. While a humanities course may not be taught as a separate subject, it is a sound approach and a productive organizing principle in the language arts. Explorations of language and how it operates discloses keys to the content and manner of humanity, its infinite variety, and the legitimacy and functioning of that variety. Championing the integrative function of humanities, language arts teachers should join forces with teachers of other content areas to create a humanities context for teaching. (HOD)

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A HUMANITIES CONTEXT FOR THE LANGUAGE ARTS

Helen C. Lee

The problem of the learner who overestimates the importance of material things and underestimates the learning that enhances life is not a new one. In a paper delivered at the NCTE Humanities Conference in 1966, Howard Nostrand said of students he knew, "They conceive their idea of relevance too narrowly for the good of their own self-fulfillment. They tend to overestimate the materialistic element in their objective, and to underestimate the breadth of self-development that will be of value for their vocational competence, civic participation and human relations."

The youth we teach are a subculture, whose deprivations are not those of hunger, nakedness, and attacks from the elements. Rather, their suffering derives from fear, aimlessness, and selfishness. Their subculturial biases cripple their humanity, and the adult culture sends them few directions designed to nurture qualities that make life not just possible but worthwhile.

In his new book The Underclass, Ken Auletta studies a group who find that having money enough to escape poverty does not guarantee that escape.

Futurist Lawrence D. Maloney tells us that soon we will live in "electronic cottages" which will furnish both vocational and avocational completeness. In this electronic cottage, what becomes of the contention of novelists from Eliot to Dostoyevsky who

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find man most human when he interacts most fully with his fellows?

John Stuart Mill says, "Men lose their high aspirations as they lose their intellectual tastes, because they have no time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of."

Even if we conceive our culture as the tossed salad of today rather than the melting pot of yesterday, we are constrained to suspect that a common core of values, making the cultural content of our lives easily communicable from one generation to another, is lacking. Our social, political, artistic, and moral folkways, even our food habits, are immensely varied. A barrier against moving toward synthesis is unwillingness to encourage, or even allow, learners to reflect upon and critique a variety of viewpoints and cultural components.

Humanistic teaching encourages learners to look out from a firm knowledge of their own culture, confident of what is best in it and understanding what in it makes life good for those who share its ambiance. Insightful reflection by learners upon their own conditions and conditions of the culture which they know best, is essential in this process. Humanities

learning provides enhancement by which learners begin to understand their own culture in examining others.

From this examination streams the light of interest, empathy, insight with which learners critique cultures not their own. In that process, they may perceive that some values other than, or even contrary to, their accepted ones offer meaning, purpose, validity, utility, and beauty. Learners develop empathy with both sameness and otherness in the human condition. Divergencies within a broad culture make this process of information gathering, empathizing, and sensitizing central to a humanities approach to learning.

The humanities illuminate a vision of both the good and the evil in man's life not exclusively attached to one item, place or circumstance. In the humanities the world appears both larger and more coherent. A review of man's search for meaning through the humanities offers an opportunity to synthesize the diversities of human experience, rescuing it from such fragmentations as nationalism, elitism, fashion, and fad.

As the humanities stimulate learners to make full use of their opportunities to be human beings, learners develop habits of suspending judgement, formulating and testing hypotheses, and applying generalizations, as well as sensitizing their aesthetic feelings. From critique of the cultural order,

learners create their own syntheses, their own personal cultures.

Much frustration and cultural disillusionment arises from a conviction that one lacks the power to affect the eventualities of one's life, that the controls of experience are elsewhere, that life is the result of random events over which one may exercise little or no control and which are, for the most part, inexplicable. Humanities learning gives a sense of control over what one understands, making one more the master and less the slave of events by enlarging the dimensions of experience that can be controlled by knowledge and disciplined feeling. The integration they provide reduces to the comprehensible order of cause and effect, the seeming randomness of human experiences.

The humanities teacher must be convinced that the humanities curriculum, far from being in a book or a guide, is alive in the classroom. It resides forever in the learner. The purpose of the teacher is to juxtapose this living curriculum against the intricate complexities, ambiguities, contradictions, and resolutions presented in the humanities. After the fullest contemplation, learners create their own syntheses of purpose, meaning, and value, making better sense of their lives by integrating more of the world into themselves and the world they inhabit.

Humanistic teaching is concerned with attitude

toward what is learned as well as with materials. It must be both method and material. One is no good without the other. Thus humanistic teaching deals with what is aesthetic, not alone so that learners may appreciate and enjoy the artifact, but so that they may discover more of themselves than they had known existed.

At the risk of making excessive claims for the primacy of our own subject area, we can readily see the language arts as central to humanities teaching. Language is the primal synthesizing, integrating process. The humanities examine man, not as an object but as a process. Language is the way the process of being human is explored. The language arts deal with those elements that enable man to accumulate and express the culture that make him human. Hence, language arts teachers have a special opportunity and responsibility to set up cross-currents to the cultural deprivation, fragmentation and confusion that afflict our learners' subcultures.

In the first half of this century, Whorf, Vigotsky, and their cohorts helped us understand that man knows most effectively and manageably those things for which he has a name. Receiving language through reading and listening and producing language through speaking and writing, man accumulates and judges his culture. The more facility he has in use of language, the more tools he has when he observes and interprets

an artifact of his culture. Whether it be a simile or a star, the greater man's adeptness in managing the linguistic elements that illuminate character, the greater his mastery of meaning and the greater his ability to manipulate in the direction of his understanding and will. Clarity in using language to express sophisticated meanings enhances power over the referents of those meanings.

The language arts teacher of the humanities knows that the humanities are in the student, not in the artifact of the culture which he examines, whether it be sentence, book, or speech. The humanistic content of these artifacts resides in what they cause to happen to the person who examines or uses them. This happening is a phenomenon of feeling as well as thought. The humanities teacher of language arts will not be content to just "expose" students to humanistic experiences but will, within the experience, create a task that maximizes the effects of the experience upon the student.

The test of whether humanistic learning has taken place is whether learners have a response to the artifact that integrates what they know about it with the feeling it arouses in them, producing a humanistic experience wholly their own. This does not mean that we encourage learners to have an opinion about everything, but that we help them to become skilled and confident in investigating their own responses and

expressing these responses in a language arts context. Learners transmute the cultural artifact they examine into a dimension of language — writing or speaking.

While a humanities course may not be taught as a separate subject, it is a sound approach and a productive organizing principle in language arts. From kindergarten through high school, the humanities should act as a curricular guide in selection of methods and materials whose content images forth the best that our culture offers. Choices must remain comprehensible to learners, stimulating in them that reflective thought which is the key to humanities learning.

Each language arts teacher will want to maintain a proper balance between books chosen for their bibliotherapeutical content and books chosen for their identification with the humanities. With proper preparation these interests may be merged, as in the case where the trendy interest in science fiction is used as one approach to Midsummer Night's Dream.

The dissection and analysis of language, which characterizes some language teaching, is antithetic to the humanities intent. This activity takes time which could be better used to increase student writing or to examine what language really is, how it actually works in man's experience, what power it gives us, in short, what place it has in making man human. Called for is a constant examination of the language students

themselves use, the language they hear and see others use, and the effects of these usages upon lives and purposes. Explorations of language and how it really operates in our lives disclose keys to the content and manner of man's humanity, its infinite variety, and the legitimacy and functioning of that variety. It leads to that inner editing of usage that keys fuller self-expression as well as avoidance of the verbal traps of gobbledgook and the deceits of propaganda. Students should engage in the scholarly collection and examination of linguistic artifacts. In so doing, they enlarge their consciousness of the linquistic choices available to them and the results of making those choices, thus, perhaps advancing their mastery of the dialect which we have determined is standard. In just these ways does the study of language move into a humanities context.

Visioning the integrative fuction of humanities, language arts teachers should join with teachers of other content areas. Whether we create a synthesis of school experiences in interdisciplinary courses or identify common purpose within separate disciplines, teachers of other subject matter areas should be urged to join us to create a humanities context for teaching. Opportunities for interdisciplinary approaches should be explored.

The humanities approach of the language arts teacher will be apparent in the warm welcome the teacher

manifests toward ideas the student is meeting in other content areas, and in provisions language arts teachers make to explore commonalities or related learnings. Students will surely believe what we show them, and we must urge our colleagues to show students that it is as important to write well in history class as in language arts class. If we are unsuccessful in this effort, the student will probably conclude that writing clearly is not as important as the English teacher has tried to make it seem, and the relatedness of a humanities approach will be lost.

For several decades, a crude but perceptive slang usage has admonished us to "get it together." Surely this is a humanities operation, and common man, as he so often does, spoke truer than he knew. This need of the hour to make sense of life, to integrate its fragments into a comprehensible whole is a humanities task, and the process is more native to the language arts discipline than any other.

Learning the language arts in a humanities context is the best preparation the learner can make in the present for the delights as well as the dangers of the future. Many tell us what the future will be like. The truth is no one knows. But we who believe in education have faith that the intellectual baggage we carry into it will enable us to make sense of it. This baggage is lightest to bear and the heaviest in productiveness when it processes the artifacts of the culture through language in a humanities context.